

Essay

Hardships of a Minor Hero in the “System”

*Hero: a person admired for his
achievements and qualities.*

I have been referred to as a hero by some just because I have made it through the system and have a plan for the future. I don't feel very heroic, but just getting through

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the system intact seems like a feat of heroic proportions—especially with the odds stacked against me, odds put in place when I was born.

It has not always been a foregone conclusion that I would make it through successfully. As described below, there are many hardships put upon kids just because they are foster children. But before I speak of those difficulties, I'd like to celebrate myself.

Prioritizing things is not easy for any adolescent. For a foster kid with no positive adult role models, it was more difficult for me. I would put partying before school work, music and dance over God, and football practice before church. Luckily I came across several people who helped guide me down another path. My pastor and a former foster father instilled the importance of education, even though they themselves did not graduate high school. Bombarded with their hardships in life, I became determined not to create the same obstacles for myself. I realized I was an important person and that God gave me dominion over tangible things. I learned the importance of morality, integrity, and my responsibilities to myself as a man.

With this new enthusiasm and despite the limits placed on me as a foster child, I began finding ways to help myself and others. Visiting convalescent homes and sick children in the hospital cheered the residents up and let me feel good for making them feel good, if only for brief moments at a time. On a more ongoing and an equally rewarding basis, I volunteered as a peer mediator, working to diffuse other teens' conflicts.

In celebration of this new way of going on, I looked for a way to express myself creatively. After several attempts with different art mediums, I chose writing and, as demonstrated in this essay, I like it.

Many times in our lives we believe a problem is fixed when it isn't broken. The "system" provides the bare necessities in life, but don't you think we (foster kids) deserve more? Our parents are the ones who failed to meet the basic requirements of parenthood, yet we catch all the suffering and madness that consumes our childhood. Finally, isn't it hard enough for teens or "minors" to gain respect and get the chance to do as others do? For example, driving a car, traveling, visiting others, and going off to college. Sure, we shouldn't complain because at least we have somewhere to live, however minimal. I think we deserve more—in fact, I demand it!

I truly believe that the "system" is nothing but a business. Foster parents receive money, minors are fed and clothed; the transaction is made. When minors don't agree, they can be replaced and uprooted to another location. I know firsthand. Many, if not all the foster parents I had, depended on the money they received for my care as income to their household. Can you imagine living in a family knowing the only reason you are there is for the check each month? So many times I felt lonely sitting on my bed crying, asking the Lord, "Why me?" Meanwhile, the parents are on the phone to DCFS asking that I be removed, and then I am the one labeled the "problem child" or "emotionally disturbed." This because I asked for more spending money or for a ride to a friend's.

How can a person be "stable" when so many people flash in and out of your life? Social workers change, lawyers change, and, seemingly the least important to everyone but me, "parents" change all the time. The children have to deal with the fact that they will never have a normal childhood because of where they came from and why—nobody else has to, and nobody thinks they themselves are responsible for the situation.

If the system is so good, why do so many of us end up in jail, homeless, or just plain mixed up? And why, when one of us does make it, is everyone shocked? This shouldn't be. If we expect our "normal" children to succeed, the standard should be the same for kids in the system. And we should be treated similarly. For example, my present foster mother fusses and yells at her grandson to make better grades and get a job—"Do something with your life," she says. Yet I bring home straight Ds and she tells me, "At least you are graduating." Now I don't prefer to be screamed at, but I do like to be loved. And if that love comes from yelling, even I don't mind a dose.

It is unfortunate that our parents couldn't provide what we needed in life. If a child were given the choice to stay with his mother and be hungry and homeless or be with foster parents, I can guarantee he would choose his mother. The reason is that even though there may be neglect and abuse, the child senses real love. Being a foster parent means being a substitute parent, not instead of. Not being with our parents causes depression (at least it did in my case). Everyone in the system throws money at psychologists, therapists, and other doctors when all we need is genuine love. The county social worker comes once a month and drops off a lot of bull, then leaves after an hour. In that time she has decided your immediate and long-term fate. Do I get to live in the same house, have the same friends, go to the same school, get to relax until the next visit, or is everything going to be to be thrown in the tempest otherwise known as "replacement"? On top of what our parents did to us, and now this, is it any wonder so many of us kids are messed up?

Now the restrictions of children in the system. For foster parents trying to truly treat us as their own, it is one obstacle after another. A foster child cannot visit a friend across the street because agency rules say permission must be gotten first. Foster children are left behind while the rest of the family goes on vacation because special permission is needed. A 17-year-old MAN is not allowed cologne, toothpaste, or deodorant because the county says it's dangerous. It is humiliating to have these common necessities and choices disregarded. And the worst restriction and horror: a man turns 18 and must leave the house because he has been terminated. It has nothing to do with "Is he ready?" but with the fact that monthly payments have stopped. It is inconsistent with maturity to be treated like a prisoner for so long and then be turned loose.

Doesn't sound like a wonderful substitute for a family, does it? Why is it that I must go through lawyers, judges, and a social worker just to get a pair of socks when I need it? Why is it that there are restrictions on what is paid for a child each month? Surely, with so many of thousands of kids in the system, all our needs can't be the same.

For all these reasons I have written about, I am ashamed of being a foster child. Even though we all know it's not my fault, I am treated the same as probation kids. Restricted, prohibited, and underprivileged.

I am going to Grambling State University, where I'll major in criminal justice. There I'll be part of the ROTC program and will play football. I plan to be the first in my family to graduate college and then go pro in the NFL.

Playing football was always a dream. In high school I realized I was good enough to consider it as a career and make it in the NFL. However, I also know that like one out of every 5,000 college players do turn pro, so I am pursuing a degree in criminal justice in order that I can become a law enforcement professional and continue to help others. In this way I also help myself.

Is all this heroic? Today, while I am reeling in the effects of being a system kid, it doesn't seem so. Just writing this essay it doesn't seem so. However, I felt this was the only time to voice my opinion and have it heard on what we all call the "system."

It's a system that systematically fosters criminals, crazies, and all kinds of weird things. Things in conflict with the welfare of youth. Until someone makes a change, we will all be guilty of raising deprived young people who never had a fair chance with their parents and never got one in the system.

